

Mayor's Council on African American Elders

C/O – Aging and Disability Services, Seattle-King County
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February 19, 2021
Zoom Meeting

Members Present – Dr. Benjamin Abe, Interim Chair, Paul Mitchell, Claudette Thomas, Mattie Taplin, Dr. Brenda Jackson

ADS Staff – Brent Butler, Cathy Knight, Karen Winston

Guests – King County Councilmember Girmay Zahilay, Maggie Harger, HopeLink

I. Recognizing Black History Month

- Members discussed what they have done, or are planning to do, to celebrate Black History Month.

II. Talk with King County Councilman Girmay Zahilay

Councilman Zahilay represents District 2 for King County. He grew up in the District 2 area and attended Baily Gatzert Elementary, Mercer Middle School, and graduated from Franklin High School. Last year was a challenging year but, in spite of that, he was able to accomplish many wins in 2020, such as investing tens of millions of dollars in Skyway, supporting small businesses through small business grants, promoting digital equity by funding internet services for low-income communities, and much more.

Questions

1. Can you tell us what you are doing to mitigate the problem of homelessness? Also, there are many African American elders who have lived in the community for a long time and own homes and rental properties. With the emergency ban on evictions, what are property owners to do, when this is their main source of income?

Response:

Homelessness – Housing is the most important issue in our region. Last year we passed the Help Through Housing Tax (0.1% sales tax increase) that will create a revenue stream to allow the purchase of empty hotels and motels to provide housing for some of the most chronically un-housed people, including those struggling with behavioral health issues, who are disproportionately African American. The funding will allow the County to provide housing for 2,000 chronically un-housed individuals.

Property Tax Relief – Last year, the King County Assessor made a big push to recruit communities to apply for property tax relief programs, following the State's approval of increasing the property tax threshold which will allow for more eligible households. Please contact my office for more information or visit the website at - www.kingcounty.gov/depts/assessor.aspx.

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Land and Empty Plots – One of the first questions I asked the County Assessor when I first took office was, “Why are we not using the empty lots that I see everywhere?” Maps from 2009 show the same properties sitting there unused. Last year, we identified two plots of land in Columbia City and worked with Sound Transit to transfer those properties to organizations lead by Black and African Americans, to build a Youth Achievement Center. The center will be a housing and resource center for youth in south Seattle.

Skyway (Unincorporated King Co.) – I grew up in the Skyway area, so I see how much neglect and disinvestment has happened in that neighborhood. The Skyway community has the highest proportion of African Americans in the entire state of Washington. It is systemic racism when you disinvest in the neighborhood that has the most Black people in the entire state. So that is one thing I chose to champion when first elected – investing more in Skyway. During my first year, because of our advocacy and community partnerships, we were able to secure:

- \$10M for a Skyway community center (first time ever)
- \$5M capital funds for affordable housing (first time ever)
- \$6M investment from Metro to expand transportation options in Skyway, which is currently a transportation desert.

2. United Way and AARP are assisting with tax preparation, but they both have a long waiting list. Do you know of any other organizations that are reaching out to seniors to help with taxes?

Response: The King County Assessors Office may be able to help with finding tax preparation assistance. I will reach out to them to see how they help with making the process more efficient.

3. I live in the Central District (CD) and I want to stay here, so I am looking for tax relief, too. But the King County Assessors Office has a long back log, and they are behind in helping. I would like to see a program to help seniors who are struggling to maintain their homes but may not qualify for re-financing programs.

Response: Thank you for bringing that to my attention. I will definitely look into that.

4. I am retired, I also live the CD, and I am a renter. Is there something being done about rent control, especially for seniors with limited incomes?

Response: I understand, and I agree with you, but there is a state-level prohibition on rent control in Washington, so rent control is not allowed. There are advocacy efforts in Olympia, and we will continue these efforts. I like your idea of making it elder-specific and/or for the most vulnerable populations – maybe that will make it less controversial. I have written down your concern and will give it more thought.

5. How are you working to ensure that a racial equity lens is applied to new policies, initiatives, and budget decisions that will benefit vulnerable BIPOC in our region?

Response: For every policy area, my lens is—who are the people struggling the most and how can we bring their voices to the table and build with them. I want to work with the people who are struggling, who cannot pay their rent, who are losing their small businesses, who are harmed by our school system, and those who were laid-off.

Last year, we saw a big movement for Black Lives Matter, and I was able to work with them to identify the changes we want to see in our county. One of the things they asked for was a system that will not send armed police officers to respond to every challenge. We worked with them and proposed an amendment to the King County Charter (Charter Amendment Number 6, included on the November 2020 ballot). The approved amendment now allows the King County system of public safety to send the right type of person to respond to different types of challenges. For example, instead of sending armed police officers to respond to a mental health crisis, we can instead send a public health official to respond to the situation. We now have a diverse menu of options to respond to different situations. This was a huge structural change, and we were able to work with grassroots people, the ones who are really impacted by police policies, to accomplish that.

6. African American families who are dealing with dementia should be addressed county-wide. For many caregivers, like myself, our careers have been cut short, we have experienced financial crisis, our elders are living longer, and there needs to be more training for caregivers. I would like to see more support for caregivers.

Response: I appreciate receiving this important information and have noted your concerns.

7. Is there anything similar to the MCAAE that represents all cities in King County? Maybe this is the time for an evolution of the MCAAE to be a more collaborative body, similar to the ADS Advisory County that represents Seattle and King County.

Response: I agree with you and love that idea! I would like to learn more about the MCAAE structure. Perhaps one day the commission could instead be the King County Executive and Mayor's Council on African American Elders and have a more regional focus.

A lot of our Black communities are being pushed out of the city limits of Seattle. That is the reason why I ran for King County Council instead of Seattle City Council. As someone who grew up in the south-end, I have seen so many of my friends, family, and neighbors pushed out of Seattle into Skyway, Federal Way, and even into Pierce County. So, if we had a more regional approach to this council, I would love to support that.

8. Regarding the health of our elders – Is there any way that we can have healthcare professionals visit homes to address some of the health issues our elders face? I think it would be a very effective way to educate elders about chronic health issues, like Alzheimer’s and diabetes, etc. The MCAAE has been advocating for years, for a nursing position to be added to the African American Elders Program (AAEP) which is a program that serves the entire county.

Response: I love that idea and would like to follow-up with you about it. It is a project we can work on together. Recently, King County started a program where a network of five vans go to community housing for older adults for vaccination purposes. When the pandemic is over why not re-purpose those vans to serve a broader purpose other than just for vaccines?

9. I am really concerned about policing. When I was a kid, we used to have all minority police officers in our community, who knew the kids there. When we got into trouble, they would come talk to us without being abusive. We now have police who are afraid of minorities. Why can’t we get more minority police who live and work in minority communities? I also think we should have more mental health support for minority communities.

Response: I hear your concerns loud and clear. I think this should be our first meeting of many, as I want to keep connecting with you. I have noted all your concerns, especially those regarding health, housing, and taxation, and now they will be my priorities. When you invite me to meet with you again, I will look forward to following-up with you about these items.

III. ADS & COVID-19 Updates

Federal

- Legislators are still working to get President Biden’s \$1.9T COVID Relief package passed through reconciliation. It will need 51 votes to pass.
- Last month I reported on additional funding for nutrition services. Washington State did receive additional funding, from that amount, King County received a little more than we expected - \$850K. This will allow us to continue to provide nutrition services during the pandemic.
- The funds being considered for the Older Americans Act are pretty generous if we get them. This funding will be flexible and will help us with access to vaccines.

State

- The State budget is still being worked on by the legislature. We do not expect cuts to long-term services and supports, including the Medicaid program.
- [The Long-Term Care Trust Act](#), that passed in 2019 creates a public long-term care benefit for Washingtonians. Workers would start paying into it in 2022 and would be able to access those funds in 2025. Now, the money just sits there gaining very little interest. Senate Democrats are trying to change the State Constitution, so those funds can be invested like retirement funds are invested for sustainability and benefit over

time, but the joint legislative resolution was voted down. Advocacy will continue in next year's legislative session.

- Sariga reported that 2021 is a big year for progressive revenue bills. Last week, she learned that the Senate proposal for a Capital Gains Tax legislation moved out of committee and is still alive. This is good news!
- 37th District Rep. Kirsten Harris-Talley sponsored (HB 1494) an Anti-Displacement Property Tax Bill. If passed, the legislation would provide housing safety, security, and protection for Washington families against gentrification and displacement risk. It would work with the County Assessor's office to create up to a \$250,000 break on property tax. The MCAAE may want to connect with Rep. Harris-Talley who is very passionate about this legislation.
- Digital Divide – Many older adults do not have access to internet and/or technology. Funding is coming from the federal government, and the State is also putting aside dedicated revenue, to make sure there is funding for digital literacy initiatives, and also for affordable and reliable internet access, especially in south King County.

COVID-19 Vaccine Update

- Maria reported that the ADS role in vaccine distribution is tied to our partnership with Public Health. ADS has been working with them to plan how vaccines will be distributed in Seattle and King County. We were given priority and/or early access to several vaccination sites. For example, we were given one-week early access to vaccine sites in Kent and Auburn. Access to appointments was only for aging network providers to register their clients. This basically allowed us to “jump the line” for BIPOC older adults and other high priority eligible communities. Early access was also provided to a site in Redmond (in partnership with Microsoft) and to a site in Renton (in partnership with Kaiser). These partnerships have been wonderful for older adults who have had difficulty navigating the process.
- Karen reported that the WA State Dept. of Health has allotted the City of Seattle an additional 1,000 doses of the vaccine. The City – in partnership with Public Health will temporarily open a community vaccination clinic at the Atlantic Street Boat Ramp in Rainier Beach, which is currently a COVID-19 testing site. The temporary clinic will operate February 24 to 28, from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. This early access is specifically for BIPOC older adults age 65 and older, and all people age 50 and older who live in a multigenerational household. If you know anyone who meets the eligibility requirements, please email their name and phone number to Karen and she will contact them to register for the vaccine.
- The Renton vaccine site will open February 21. The AAEP, Central and SouthEast Senior Centers, Sound Generations, Neighborhood House, and other aging network providers will all have access. The West Seattle vaccine site, a smaller site, closed early due to a limited supply, and the New Beginnings Christian Fellowship vaccine site, scheduled for February 20, is full.

Age Friendly

- Brent reminded everyone that the 2021 Age Friendly priorities are: 1) Connectivity; 2) Inclusion; and 3) Access.
- Brent described the Age Friendly Summary Report on 2020 activities and accomplishments.
- Brent will be working with Dr. Abe to address vaccine hesitancy.

IV. MCAAE Recruitment Updates

- Karen reported that the ADS communications manager is working on a press release regarding MCAAE recruitment that will be distributed the week of February 22nd.
- Karen introduced Sharon Sobers-Outlaw, who is interested in being appointed.

V. Dr. Abe's Closing Remarks

- Dr Abe would like to see a better connection and more frequent contact between the MCAAE and the new mayor, beginning in 2022.

VI. April Meeting

- The guest speaker for the April meeting is from Community Health Partners of WA.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:30 p.m.